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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, IO/UNP

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TAGS: PREL PBTS PTER FR MO AG SA

SUBJECT: MINIMAL FRENCH EXPECTATIONS FOR FOURTH ROUND OF WESTERN SAHARA TALKS IN MANHASSET

REF: A. (A) RABAT 236

¶B. (B) PARIS 202

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) French MFA DAS-equivalent for North Africa Nathalie Loiseau told us March 12 that the GOF continued to have extremely low expectations for the fourth round of UN-sponsored talks on Western Sahara set for early next week in Manhasset. Indeed, the French are so pessimistic that they hope the continued failure to make any meaningful progress does not erode the delicate consensus in the UN Security Council that allowed it to pass two resolutions *inter alia* referring to the Moroccan autonomy plan as a potential basis for negotiations. As Loiseau put it, the risk is that the delicate "unbalanced balance" slightly in Morocco's favor could return to a less satisfactory balance favoring neither that results in further paralysis.

¶2. (C) UNSYG Personal Envoy Peter van Walsum's Paris stop in mid-February after his tour of the region apparently did nothing to ease French concerns about the overall direction of the Manhasset talks or van Walsum's role in the diplomatic process. According to Loiseau, van Walsum met with French Presidency diplomatic adviser Jean-David Levitte and senior IO and NEA bureau equivalents at the MFA. The readout from his discussions was vague but congruent with what his staff has told Department officers and our embassies have reported from the region. Loiseau complained that van Walsum frustrated his French interlocutors by not answering many of their questions, particularly on the way ahead. It was not clear, for example, what his repeated claims to have told the Algerians and Polisario that he continues to believe an independent Sahrawi state is not viable really mean in concrete terms for the negotiations in progress. Loiseau hinted that the French are thinking about an approach to the UNSYG or senior UN Secretariat staff about a possible alternative to van Walsum. When pressed on this point, however, she indicated that nothing imminent was likely to happen. Instead, France will wait for the fourth round to occur and for van Walsum's report to the UNSC next month in conjunction with the debate on MINURSO's renewal. Loiseau expressed the faint hope that van Walsum would state more clearly than he has in the past responsibility for the lack of progress in the talks.

¶3. (C) In terms of UNSC dynamics, Loiseau reported that French President Sarkozy had raised Western Sahara during his recent visit to South Africa when he met with President Mbeki, emphasizing the need to resolve this longstanding question for the sake of regional stability. Sarkozy asked Mbeki to review the Moroccan autonomy plan with an eye to accepting it as the formal basis for negotiations. Mbeki, according to Loiseau, did not reject Sarkozy's appeal out of

hand but did refer to the ANC's historical ties dating back decades with the Polisario to the time when both were engaged in "liberation struggles."

¶4. (C) During a brief discussion of NEA A/S Welch's visit to North Africa, Loiseau agreed with our impression that neither the Moroccans nor the Algerians were inclined to change the generally negative dynamic in their bilateral relationship. She placed most of the blame on Algeria for preferring to use the unresolved conflict as a lever in its contest for regional supremacy with Morocco. Her impression remained that the Algerian leadership was largely detached from the dispute in terms of seeking its resolution and had no political interest in doing so while sensitive political issues related to fighting terrorism and President Bouteflika's quest for a third term were more prominent. Loiseau lamented how Algeria's obstructive diplomatic efforts had successfully countered what she considered a fairly effective and laudable Moroccan campaign to sell its plan to members of the UNSC and beyond.

¶5. (C) Returning to French criticism of van Walsum, Loiseau expressed concern that he was jeopardizing the confidence building measures -- especially the family visits -- by introducing them into the political discussions. France sees the CBMs (with the possible exception of the thematic seminars, which are problematic for Morocco) as the one ray of hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. She hoped that the USG would continue to support the CBMs and keep them as separate as possible from the so far intractable core political issues.

¶6. (C) Comment: French expectations for the next round in Manhasset were already minimal, but the meeting with van

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Walsum only seems to have reinforced fears that the limited progress achieved in the UNSC could be rolled back by the impression of further inertia. We had not seen ref a on the latest Moroccan complaints about Polisario activity east of the berm prior to the meeting, but Loiseau stressed French appeals to Morocco and Algeria to refrain from rhetoric or actions that might provoke the other side. Although less firmly expressed than at our last meeting, Loiseau stated that France remains convinced that the stakes are too high in terms of security and regional stability to allow the UN to drift back into a posture that would entertain an independent Sahrawi state as a potential outcome. The recent kidnapping of Austrian tourists in Tunisia and Algeria's apparent inability to prevent the perpetrators from reaching a reputed sanctuary in Mali underscores for Paris how easy it is for terrorists to range throughout the trans-Saharan region. Loiseau, who visited Western Sahara during a previous posting in Rabat, further expressed for the first time we have heard from a French official worry that Sahrawi frustration could lead some of its population to join with Islamist terrorists. She repeated the hope that the U.S. and France would confer after the fourth round of talks in Manhasset on next steps prior to MINURSO's renewal and beyond. Embassy Paris would strongly support such consultations. End comment

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